

A Radical Act of Remembering

by

Maria Kunda, BA Hons., BFA Hons.

Submitted in fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts by Research
University of Tasmania, 1996

*Tas School of Art
graduated 1997*

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ABSTRACT

Anatomy is a self depiction, a series of body images in the manner of self portraits, created without recourse to a mirror image. The work comprises large-scale coloured etchings, which are assemblages of body prints and collaged 'found' anatomical drawings. The symbolism refers to the pre-Oedipal relation. This issue is met in Julia Kristeva's discussion of the semiotic chora, Luce Irigaray's discussion of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of vision, and other sources that I have referred to which reconsider the Lacanian narrative in psychoanalysis.

Much of the debate about women's place in the symbolic realm has been conducted at the level of language. *Anatomy* contributes a visual parallel: a move to subvert the symbolic centrality of the female body as a passive plane or surface upon which meanings are projected, and to reconfigure a body image which acts as an active signifying entity.

The pictorial solution that I arrived at utilises back-lighting to activate the body images, adding a visceral, immediate, and deliberately auratic element to the etched images. The illumination notionally returns the viewer's gaze and creates an intimacy - something like a caress - which alludes to the pre-Oedipal maternal gaze.

Acknowledgements

My supervisors Milan Milojevic and Rod Ewins, and the staff in the printmaking department were encouraging and supportive throughout the course of my study. Morag Porteous gave generous and invaluable assistance with printing and writing. I would like to thank Hannah Gamble, Teresa Walton, Bridget Shaw and my parents, for their help and care.

Maria Kunda, 1996.

Contents

Introduction	1
1. Diarism and Self Portraiture	10
2. On Practice	24
3. Radical Acts of Remembering	38
4. Subjectivity and Narrative in the Work of Louise Bourgeois	53
Conclusion	60
Bibliography	62
Appendix: Visual Reference to the Exhibition	67

Introduction

Preamble

The exhibited works comprising *Anatomy* are the result of my continuing interest in creating self-portraiture, an imperative which persists for me in the face of the widely heralded decline of portraiture as a genre. The impetus for the present works, and the questions the thesis addresses, grew out of a number of lacunae that arose in my previous self-portrait work, and for this reason it is appropriate to go into pre-history to outline these concerns.

For many years I drew portraits of my face from the mirror, until the act became habitual. I began to draw my face in a concerted way in adolescence when I took up writing a journal. The impulse to draw myself was inextricably connected to diary writing. The relationship between text and image was not that of illustration of the words by the images, but an integral, reciprocal relation by which slippage from one means of expression to the other occurred.

Diary writing and self-drawing were, for very many years, semi-automatic, driven activities which I saw as foibles rather than as significant practice. Despite such a dismissive attitude towards my own efforts, I found other biographies and autobiographies worthy and interesting. My own dabbings I thought of as secondary activities which merely fuelled and facilitated my thinking in other areas, especially my studies and 'serious' attempts at writing for a readership. I would turn to my diary or self portraits when I became blocked in some such other activity, and that occurred very frequently! At the time I was not familiar with the term 'resistance', but it was the case that I encountered a lot of resistance in myself, and on such occasions I would turn to what I call 'mirror-work'.

Originally my diaries and self portraits may have been born out of a need for self-solace, but more positively they were a means of stimulating and

reformulating myself, and establishing what I now think of as an ethical position or ground. They provided a confessional function certainly; and furthermore, they created a theatre for the play of resistances, and a position from which to interact. Importantly too, for me diarism and self portraiture are both entry points into broader cultural discourse. As a 'bookish' girl, I developed an internal monologue in need of an outlet. Once given a vehicle, this monologue expanded into an experimental dialogue with myself. Mirror-work requires a measure of privacy; more importantly, it creates and gives rise to an imaginary realm, which permits an interior life and tableau for expressiveness which would not otherwise exist.

Having become an established habit, my diaries broadened in imaginary dimension, as the body of work in the notebooks informed and fed itself, and created challenges for my outer life. The diaristic process became something which addressed itself, and forced experimentation in style and actual living. It continues to operate as a presence and reference point, though due to the work I do now, my 'straight' diarism takes a minor role. A diary can operate like a prayer, a wager, a deity, a mother's voice, a father's voice; it can be a confessional or a home. It can be a monument, an archive or a spectre: many or all of these things, but certainly more than a simple record¹.

I made diaristic books for many years virtually without re-viewing them apart from, say, glancing over the last entry, and certainly not re-reading them

¹ Anaïs Nin's diaries, and the discursive texts she produced subsequent to the publication of her diaries, are an example of someone's diaries informing, shaping and becoming one with their public life. A book of texts and interviews of Nin entitled *A Woman Speaks: The Lectures, Seminars and Interviews of Anaïs Nin*, edited with an introduction by Evelyn J. Hinz, Swallow Press, Chicago: 1975, is about the diaristic process and its products in her life, the main issue being that she evolved from diarist into 'speaker'. It also exemplifies the merging of diaristic and fictional practices. The diaries are published in volumes I-VI, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York (published various years).

systematically from beginning to end. This was partly through lack of curiosity and my disregard of the manuscripts as readable documents, and partly because for many years I did not have access to all of the volumes at once. I returned home after a journey abroad, and in the midst of re-packing I idly began to read the diaries, and then looked over them chronologically. I was met by a ghost of myself. When I looked over my old books, what was interesting was recurrence of events and expressions. As my own reader and viewer, I imposed patterns, themes, and 'developments', just as though I was reading a fictitious work. Where there were no intentional structures, I found myself "reading for plot".²

Out of that first reading of the manuscripts, I was moved to make a prior body of work dealing with this ghosting effect of seeing the present through the past. In those prints I aimed to capture and display something of the essence of the books; their mood and their contemplative, imaginative space. Those prints were a means of exporting the interiority I had created with the manuscripts. They had connections to traditional modes of self portraiture, in that I depicted myself by making drawings of my face from the mirror and from photographs - in much the same way that I always had within the notebooks - and represented myself and my connections to the world through depicting the objects and patterns about me, including handwritten text. I permitted myself to impose certain reading effects or interpretations upon the original documents. I depicted myself as an hysteric, and the space which I occupied as hysterical, especially in response to Freud's infamous

² Hal Foster uses the phrase 'to read for plot' in *Compulsive Beauty*, October Books, MIT Press, Mass. 1993. See his footnote 3 to Chapter 3, 'Convulsive Identity', p.242. In 'Postmodernism in Parallax', *October* Winter 1993, he elaborates the Freudian notion of deferred action, and extends it beyond its application to individual subjectivity to reconsider the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. The concept of deferred action is that we can speak of changes in the present indirectly, by reconstruction of past moments.

'Dora' case. My use of text in these images was connected to the relation between occluded speech and bodily symptoms. It was a way of exploring the notion of resistances and repression in myself, and of considering the relationship between narrative and the body.

When I made that work I did not agonise over the pictorial and symbolic relation between image and text. I neither treated Lacan's famous essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', and another essay, 'The Freudian Thing'³ particularly critically, nor did I have any qualms about the nature of the reconstructive 'hysterical' reading I was applying to the manuscripts.

Lacan's two essays triggered and informed my attempts to represent myself and my relation to the object world and to language. My images were reasonably fractured in response to the texts. Having laboured over the theoretical issues through making the pictures, many questions emerged later about subjectivity, and I became more attuned to the feminist debate surrounding Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Ultimately I became aware that the manner of representation I was using worked against itself. I had emphasised the fragmentary subjectivity delineated by Lacan. In doing so I became less convinced of its essential or universal nature, and more receptive to critical views which speculated on the possibility of an alternative kind of subjectivity. I was also motivated by the bid to *overcome* the sense of fracture. If this fractured subjectivity was an historical-cultural construct. I wanted to try to know and depict a kind of subjectivity, perhaps a deeper layer *beneath* the fragmented, armoured ego layer. Apart from having theoretical reservations about the premises of my work, I lost conviction in the system of representation I had been using. I came to realise it was riddled with tropes that I wished to break with.

³ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits, a Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan, W.W. Norton & Co, London:1977, pp. 1-7; 114 -145.

In the last stages of making that body of work, I did some life modelling for the first time. It was not a deliberate experiment, but one born of necessity. When I looked at drawings that other people did of me, I could see certain stereotypes at work. This is an obvious observation about drawing generally, but when I could see it happening to my own body image, it struck me forcibly. I could see that for the most part they were drawing pictures preconfigured in their own heads, very often in a recognisable style, and projecting this image onto the model: me. I thought of this transposition of my image as something like inadvertent montage. This alerted me to the possibility that I was doing the same in my self portraits; sieving my image through conventions of female representation. Life modelling brought issues to do with the history of the female nude close to home; and the way that traditions and institutions that people like to classify as passé, obsolete or extinct, persist because they continue to structure our imaginations.⁴

'Ah, here I have been renoired' I would think, looking at a drawing of myself done by a smooth hand that had bolstered my thighs, and sentimentalised my eyes. Moreover, the hand had been affixed to a body that had positioned itself *just so* the angles were of renoirable geometry. I used my apparently 'passive' time as Artist's Model to actively criticise the *performance* of the Artist, for it is quite apparent that the model occupies a largely ignored position as *audience*. I would run a commentary to myself in the course of a drawing session something like this:

Ah, he's matisse'd the background, hmm... and, building up to a bit of picassing with the upper arm...heavy, confident line-work and..., No! Unfortunately he's schieled the elbow, very knobbly and sharp and quite

⁴ Since then I have become aware of the use by a number of artists of other people's drawings as part of their practice. For instance Mattys Gerber has used drawings by street artists in an conflation of icons of Christ and portraits of young women. See Ben Curnow, 'Closer Up Into The Sunset', *Artlink*, vol. 15, Winter/Spring, 1995, p. 32.

out of keeping with the rather nice modigglying of the neck. A moment's hesitation. Yes, but he's collecting himself now, slightly embattled at this stage, but not to be deterred, he's moving off the arm altogether to make a brave attempt at compensating for the elbow gaffe by emphasising the *stole*, so fetchingly draped over the shoulder...Oh wait! *O-o-o-h*, looks like he's fauvé it! And it's over.

Troublingly, in a fit of inadvertent primitivism, he over-animated the stole and it has sprung to life, triumphing over yet another nude study. He's panting now and removing the paper clips, dekooned and defeated.

Applying this same jocular logic to myself, I wondered to what extent I simply say, *kahloed* my face, and I wished to loosen some hold that my eye's appetite for pictures had over my own practice. I drew an analogy at this time between the position of the recumbent (or otherwise) female nude, and the hysteric on the couch, and was uncomfortable with the way my work to date had not really escaped the geometry of these tableaux. Out of these concerns and reservations I developed a proposal for the current work, in which I sought to continue previous practice, but to make a radical shift within my self-portraiture practice.

*

The Research Proposal

I proposed to develop works of interrogative self portraiture, in which I would not only be trying to make images of myself, but also to question - and to some degree reinvent - my means of doing so. I declared as my intention that the work would notionally be an 'Anatomy', comprising a series of large etchings. I proposed that the work would involve an active engagement with the ideas of a number of French feminist writers, all of whom privilege the body in their speculations on human subjectivity, and whose works constitute critical responses to the Lacanian narrative.

The work I have made stuck closely to the original proposal, and as it progressed it was not so much a matter of adapting or changing the proposal, as one of clarifying

and elaborating the questions and principles guiding the process.

By applying the logic of anatomy to the project, I wished to contend that portraiture need not be confined to dealing with surfaces and everyday appearances, but could be extended to deal with depths and structures. I intended that the structures and layers that I would depict would be fanciful, and descriptive of emotional states. I consider that my intention was similar to that of an anatomist proper, and especially to early anatomists whose pictures hold a strong aestheticism: to dissect, describe, organise, chart and name aspects of my body and its being-in-the world. In other words, through the work I sought to give form to the hitherto unseen and undescribed, and to some extent to chart the imaginary space I occupy.

The other reason for thinking of the project in the terms of anatomy is that I wanted to work from an etymological connection between the body and the book; I saw the work as an attempt at creating a 'corpus', but this aspect of the proposal remained implicit. Later, I brought this connection between body and book to the fore in my own thinking, and it became plain that I wanted to confer upon my work the auratic quality inherent to precious books. This issue is drawn out in chapter one.

Inspired by various works, but principally by an essay by Hal Foster, I was persuaded that the form of fragmentation of identity and body concept I had been taking for granted was an historical outcome: a theory of a specifically 'modern ego'.⁵ Working from this assumption, I wanted to make images that configured a more total self representation: a projection of a state of being that I had an inkling of, and that I wished to come to light. I also wanted to employ a new system of imaging that did not rely upon me drawing my mirror image or working from

⁵ Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism in Parallax', *October*, Winter 1993. This essay provides a challenging, succinct discussion of different discourses of the subject during the early and late modernist periods, and into postmodernism.

photographs. I wanted to circumvent the formulated - indeed formulaic - gaze which configures my image in the mirror, and the way I pose my expression and gestures. The prints are an attempt to repossess my body and approach it in a fresh way, a way that is less conventionally and stylistically entangled. Fundamentally, I wanted to make images, but I wanted to create a system of self-portraiture that increased the privilege of touch, and re-ordered the structure of my body image. The pictorial solution I arrived at is a form of collage/montage in which body prints form a layer. By this method I sought to explore beyond and beneath a layer of subjectivity that is reasonably well theorised by psychoanalysis, to a 'pre-historic' layer which is more difficult to imagine - less accessible to memory - perhaps precisely because it is the very basis of imagination and language. I wanted ultimately to experience and demonstrate a kind of subjectivity which took account of this layer. This strategy is described in chapter two.

In chapter three I report on the theoretical sources I nominated, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Michele Montrelay and Hélène Cixous, and on how these readings contributed to the images. The writings of all of these authors are indebted in some way to Lacanian psychoanalysis, and in their critical responses they all differ in various ways from the Lacanian orthodoxy. My reading was mainly focused on a convergent theme in their writings: the pre-Oedipal relation; the infantile relation to the maternal body, and the rhythms and pulsations in the infant's undifferentiated sensorium as the source of language and imagination.

I wanted to extrapolate on the way this theme has been taken up by feminist theorists to discuss the issue of 'feminine writing', and to develop the issue of aura and the maternal gaze. Re-reading the phenomenological works by Bachelard and Merleau-Ponty crystalised some of the concerns behind my endeavour, in light of the way their fluid 'feminine' analogies have been taken up by some of

the women writers I am concerned with. I depict the water and vessel metaphors the writers use, and discuss how I have employed these.

In chapter four I offer a reading of the works of Louise Bourgeois in terms of self-portraiture. I discuss the subjective expression of the works, their difficulty and their presence. I viewed an exhibition of her work late in my course, and it crystalised many of the issues that I have raised in the forgoing chapters. Seeing her work helped me to come to terms with decisions I made about trying to create an auratic experience by the manner in which I installed and lit my work. It also drove me to consider the relationship between personal narrative and apparently 'abstract' art. Chapter four is an attempt to read the work of Bourgeois through my knowledge of her biography, and by supplying my own narrative. I have not tried to draw parallels and resonances between her work and my own, because to do so would be presumptuous, but the discussion of her work is intended to contextualise my own.

I now see my work as the accomplishment of what Barthes has referred to as "a virtually *impossible* Text" (which is the outcome of the diary, but no longer resembles it)⁶ and as a series of experiments in depicting - and indeed experiencing - a fluid form of subjectivity, as opposed to a rigidified and alienating form of subjectivity.

The persistence of images within the diaristic process I see as its limit condition. The making of images has 'rescued' the diaries for me over and over again, and provides a platform of renewal and a re-entry point when language fails me as a means of self expression, self discovery, and pleasure.

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⁶ Barthes, Roland, 'Deliberation', in *Barthes Selected Writings*, Introduced by Susan Sontag, Fontana 1989.

Chapter I

Diarism and Self Portraiture

But at the fountain Narcissus has not given himself over exclusively to contemplation of himself. His own image is the centre of a world. With and for Narcissus, the whole forest is mirrored, the whole sky approaches to take cognisance of its grandiose image.

Gaston Bachelard⁷

This chapter is a deliberation on the nature of diaristic expression and self-portraiture, and describes the connections between these two kinds of reflective work as I employ them. It sets out questions I have had about the self-writing and self-drawing processes and their interconnection, and leads to a discussion of reverie and signification. The concerns I outline in this section re-appear in a more concrete discussion of the work in chapter two.

In the course of collecting material for the *Anatomy* (and I shall discuss the collecting imperative in the next chapter), I treated the manuscripts of my total diaristic output as an archive, and searched it for origins. I browsed for entries which sought to explain my diaristic motive. A few entries stuck out boldly. At their source was one I had written when I was twenty. Preceding it, the entries are sporadic, and reveal a dissatisfaction with their own mundanity, but this particular entry spawns a concerted and ongoing *gust* of diarism. When I found it, I considered I had struck the tap root of the diaries. It refers to a discussion about an essay I had written. In the diary I wrote,

He complimented my writing style. He said it had 'flair', but that I had not approached my topic properly. He had said that the problem was that my thinking was like smoke. He said I enveloped and permeated a topic instead of clarifying and delineating it.

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, translated by Edith R. Farrel, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, Dallas Texas 1983, p. 24.

The diary says that I left feeling 'chastened and flawed'. What it does not say, and does not need to because it is implied in the tone and emphasis, is that I was pleased about being singled out in this way. The diary expresses my feelings of shame as I acknowledge that the diagnosis is correct. Reading it today, it seems patently obvious that I gloried in the shame of being a smoke-thinker.

I confessed in the diary that 'Indeed my thinking is like smoke. What am I to do?' In subsequent entries, woven in with other concerns, I refer to this incident, and report my resolution to change the faulty structure of my thought, though I ask myself whether it is even possible to alter the shape of one's thinking. Tentatively I write the blasphemy, 'is this style of thinking necessarily *bad*? After all, I can think of writers of whom it could be said that they think like smoke'. I also query the use of metaphor as a means of criticising my essay writing style, 'It isn't really a very precise diagnosis, because actually it is, itself, just a loose metaphor.' One I was not going to readily abandon, apparently. The journal ostensibly becomes a program to eradicate the smokiness of my thought; to wipe out imprecision and my noxious smoky style.

Of course what happened was that the programmatic attempt to curb the smokiness itself became a billowing, curlicuing articulation and elaboration of self-perpetuating and all-engulfing smoke. Smoke igniting smoke. Smoke which also begged the obvious question, where on earth was the fire?, if indeed there was one. The entries referring to smoke have the tendency to look back in time to earlier scenes, and to documentary 'evidence'.

One highly illustrated or 'illuminated' entry reports finding a grade one school report amongst some school memorabilia. The teacher passed judgement about my lack of attentiveness with the verdict, 'Maria dreams'. Oscillation between drawing and writing prevails in this entry. As I report 'Maria dreams', there is a break in my cursive handwriting, and I write the words tightly,

presumably in mimicry of the teacher's hand. The end of the paragraph breaks off, and the phrase 'Maria Dreams' is written twice more, larger, and with decorative embellishments. Then the text continues, reporting a visual memory which has been sparked. I remember some intensely coloured libertine nasturtiums growing abundantly just outside the classroom window. From this imago I extrapolate the warm afternoon fug of the classroom, and the teacher's voice droning somewhere very distantly, just an undulating patter, until it says my name, dragging me back from the colours, painfully pulling my consciousness back into the stuffy room. The last part of the account is not so much a memory but a fictitious reconstruction. Other entries of that type focus upon photographs or mental 'still' images - imagos like the nasturtiums - and precipitate the retrieval of very old memories. Smoke monologues seemed to readily to convert into self portraits, and spates of broody drawing accompany such memorial writing.

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The hermetic processes of diarism and self-portraiture are commonly perceived as indicative of a high level of self absorption. It is often assumed that a large measure of vanity or narcissism is entailed in self-representation, and perhaps that is why many people, including myself, are often coy about the fact that they engage in such 'navel gazing' activities. I assent to the navel gazing charge, because ultimately what is at stake is a search for origins. Above and beyond that, motivations for self-representation are diverse. What is probably easy to overlook is the way that *dissolution of self* can be the result of protracted engagement with the mirror. Sustained self scrutiny - visual or verbal - goes beyond mere recognition. The shattering of narcissistic self-integrity that can be provoked by reflective labour is the

impetus for an experimental practice of transformative potential.

In the process of repeatedly drawing one's own face, the pose or expression is 'in concert' with the activity of one's drawing hand. One's face oscillates between familiarity and strangeness, attractiveness and ugliness, and all manner of other polarities that dissolve beneath the pressure of one's own gaze. Drawing one's own face is often a convenient exercise when one simply wants to draw or write, and certainly one of the stakes in self portraiture and diarism is the skill with which you manage to 'put yourself down' which, if you show these expressions to no-one else, is purely a matter of your own judgement: that's me, or that's not me.

Speaking for myself - but I believe this would account for many people who draw themselves - the ultimate satisfaction and end-point of persistent, repetitious drawing of my own face was the stage I arrived at when I started to see *into, past, or through* my own reflected image. When I reached that point, I could happily stop. If I did not reach that point, the session felt like a failure, or a truncated process. The resultant drawings were usually disposable, though some survived, not through a selective process but through hap-chance, if they were folded into the diary or drawn on the pages. Many of these are nothing more than uninteresting scribbles. Typically, such a diaristic session might begin with not very good likenesses, move on to better ones and end in autographic marks. Sometimes a drawing would be produced in which awkward handling became a virtue. Sometimes the product had no real quality, except as a link in a chain that attests to the passage of a process. At other times, the drawing process would be arrested by a memory, like the nasturtiums. Such an image would be incorporated into the page, and sometimes in words I would commit to paper the train of association.

Revelation and clarity about externalities and general concerns, and a type of contemplative heightened

awareness can result from drawing-through one's own image. The Surrealists, and those who inspired them, recognised and valorised this condition. Hal Foster says that for Max Ernst it was the ideal condition of art to be - "engrossed in this activity (passivity)" [*Beyond Painting*, p.8], to be suspended in a sentence disruptive of identity, a convulsive identity in which the axes of desire and identification cross. It is a "hysterical" condition that the surrealists prized above all others: in its benign form they called it *disponibilité*, in its anxious form "critical paranoia" [*Beyond Painting*, p.8].⁸

I would hazard that the internal monologue, or the palpitation that lies beneath the urge to draw one's self is outwardly directed, no matter how problematically. I think Mike Parr's self-portraiture exemplifies a quality of autism and resistance, at its most raw and pared down, that underlies the motivation of a great deal of self-portraiture. His own comments about his work support my contention. Speaking about foul-bite as part of his etched imagery, he made the following remark, but the point extends beyond the issue of the surface treatment in the work and into what he is calling 'noise' here:

'Foul-bite/noise' is then a truly formative dimension. It is this aspect of absolute transgression, pathos, estrangement that collectivises my project so that the self portrait becomes an absolutely open or provisional image of 'everyman'.⁹

The issue of resistance imbedded in communication is an important feature of much self portraiture and diarism. I singled out the smoke theme in my own diary because it is the first attempt in the diary to consider the structure of reflection and imagination: the first time the diary self-consciously folds in upon itself to question its own means. It is writing about writing, and about the difficulty of writing. This level of thought, when writing is at its most self-reflexive, seemed to readily occasion or convert to drawing. The flow of associations I described above, the

⁸ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, October Books, MIT Press, Mass. 1993, p. 80.

⁹ Mike Parr, *Prints by Mike Parr*, exhibition catalogue for the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra 1990, compiled by Roger Butler, Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund, 1993.

school report, nasturtium imago and classroom reconstruction - which is typical of the structure of the diaries, now suggests to me a collage predisposition in the earlier way the diary/drawing process operated.

On the one hand, the mental attitude or convulsive condition in which these associations take place has something pathetic and abject about it, but on the other hand there is a devotional aspect to it, and I think this is a particular quality of the privacy and humility of the book form. With the advent of mechanical printing, the iconic aspect of books has all but been lost. This is not a simple effect of mass reproduction. It is not merely an aesthetic effect of the distinction forced between illustration and text by mechanised type. This divorce between image and text, and loss of an original hieroglyphic quality of the once written, now printed, word, is one aspect of the decline of the book as a precious and auratic object.

The aura of books used to be derived in part from the hands that laboured in devotional attitude to produce them. Apart from the autographic quality of the text, the monks sometimes depicted themselves with a self portrait in the marginalia of illuminated manuscripts. These little self-portraits underscore the iconic value of those books as the fruit of monastic production. At a stretch, this type of motif could be construed as a diaristic element.

Further to this crafted aspect of aura, the iconic aspect is bound (no pun intended) in the very etymology of 'book' as 'corpus', which merges book and anatomy. Michel Foucault characterises the analogue of body and book as being based in their positional characters. Body and book are both meteoric. They both operate as constellations of forces of history. He says,

The book and the corpse are inextricably bound in history, in language, and in hope. By "corpse" we mean both flesh and context, that is the body of the dead as well as the constellation of forces that endow it as living. Likewise, "book" refers not only to the object and its contents but also to the technological, cultural and economic apparatus that produces it. In the late

twentieth century, both book and corpse emerge as sites of agitation and desire...¹⁰

The symbiosis of book and body images bestows narrative to the body and imbues the book with passion.

*

Jeanette Winterson's recent novel, *Art and Lies: A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd* concerns self reflection, biography and the position of women in representation. The structure of metaphor in the novel frequently slides into abstraction. 'There is no such thing as autobiography there's only art and lies'¹¹, says one, or none, of the characters: it is possibly Sappho. Sometimes the narration loses its subject, which is any one of the three 'Voices' or 'the Bawd' - or, just the *page itself*.

'The Bawd' is Doll Sneerpiece, a character who seems to have found her way out of a Charles Dickens novel. As a bawd, she promiscuously enters any narrative and disrupts the structure of the story. The three voices have been named from history, but their characters only occasionally and loosely resemble their namesakes. Picasso is a (mostly contemporary) young woman painter; Handel is a male doctor, and Sappho is a poet or a poem. Sappho is the most shifting and ephemeral 'character', in both chronological and metaphysical terms. She transports through time and space, and dissolves into metaphor: she is merely words; a name.

Her body is an apocrypha. She has become a book of tall stories, none of them written by herself. Her name has passed into history. Her work has not. Her island is known to millions now, her work is not.¹²

So Sappho, the legendary poet whose poems are lost or fragmentary, is employed as a shifter, a marker, for those excluded from representation by the structure of

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, Vintage Books, New York: 1975, p.149.

¹¹ Jeanette Winterson, *Art and Lies*, Vintage Books 1995, p.69.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

representation itself. This character is so elusive that she melts into the page. She is the text.

The novel begins with a description of the aura of an ancient book which borders on the divine. Paradoxically, this book has reflective, shadowy depths and opacity combined with searing luminosity. The opening passage counterpoints the flashing of a shaft of late afternoon sun through the windows of a train with a book being opened by a commuter.

From a distance only the light is visible, a speeding gleaming horizontal angel, trumpet out on a hard bend. The note bells. The note bells the beauty of the stretching train that pulls the light in a long gold thread. It catches in the wheels, it flashes on the doors, that open and close, that open and close, in commuter rhythm.

On the overcoats and briefcases, brooches and sighs, the light snags in rough-cut stones that stay unpolished. The man is busy, he hasn't time to see the light that burns his clothes and illuminates his face, the light pouring down his shoulders with biblical zeal. His book is a plate of glass.¹³

There is a doubling here between the rhythm of the light flashing into the train and bouncing off objects, and the stylistic repetition, 'that open and close, that open and close'. Notice too, the metaphorical reversal in 'biblical zeal' being attributed to the light, rather than illumination being attributed to the book.

Next there is a play upon the corporeity of the book, with its literal materiality and its metaphoric associations with a body. When the commuter opened the book, 'The pages were thick, more like napkins than paper, more like sheets than napkins, glazed yellow by time.'¹⁴ Metaphors begin to ooze and trickle from its very substance. What is more, the potentialities of the book for signifying are far from exhausted: 'The cut pages had tattered edges but not all of the pages had been cut. In spite of its past, this book had not been finished, but unfinished by whom? The reader or the writer?' This particular book is 'naked' and 'bony':

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

The book had no cover. While sleeker volumes cowered inside their jackets, this one lifted its ragged spine to the sun, a winter sun of thin beams and few hours. A sun that sank red disc of hosannas.

With the opening of the book, the first person singular, one of the 'I's of the narrative, springs into being:

I untied the waxy string and the book fell over my hands in folds of light. My hands shook under the weight of the light. Those heavy yellow squares saturated my palms and spilled down onto my trouser legs. My clothes were soaked in light. I felt like an apostle. I felt like a saint, not a dirty tired traveller on a dirty tired train. It was a trick of course, a fluke of the weak sun magnified through the thick glass. And yet my heart leapt. I put my hand on the book, it was warm, it must have lain in the sun. I laughed; a few lines of physics had been turned into a miracle. Or: A miracle has been turned into a few lines of physics?

I turned to see my own reflection in the black window...¹⁵

The link between self-reflection and the book concerns me here. Certain diaries and rare hand-made books made in the second part of this century share the auratic quality of illuminated manuscripts and ancient books. They have in common an autographic feature, and a contemplative and devotional quality. No matter how rugged the direct graphic qualities of the writing, personal manuscripts can have an 'illuminated' character. This is the direct result of the crafting of the article, and of the absorption entailed in privately produced pages. The page is not just a reflective surface, but an absorbent fabric.

The intensity of Donald Friend's diaristic sketch books, and Frida Kahlo's journals¹⁶ suggest something monastic and even divine in their execution. In Kahlo's journal, much of the script is in coloured ink or paint, and the intensity of colour and boldness of mark-making communicate unequivocal emotions, from rapture to despair. Though her diary is arresting and powerful, it

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 4.

¹⁶ Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Portrait*, a reproduction of Kahlo's diaries, with essays by Sarah M. Lowe and Carlos Fuentes, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1995. Incidentally, the way Kahlo's manuscript has been digitally reproduced in this volume captures something of the aura of the original text by virtue of the high fidelity of its graphic qualities.

Frida Kahlo, A page from her journal,
[Source: *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Portrait*, With essays
by Sarah M. Lowe and Carlos Fuentes, Bloomsbury Publishing,
London, 1995.]

Ayer siete de Mayo de
1953. al caerme en
las baldosas de piedra
se me entorpeció en una
nalga (nalga de perro)
una ahuya. Me trajeron
inmediatamente al Hospital
en una ambulancia.
Sufrí de enorme dolor
y gritando en la distancia
de casa al Hospital
Inglés - me tomaron
una radiografía - y una
localizaron la ahuya y
me la van a sacar pronto
de estos días con amor.
Gracias a mi Dr.
Javier de toda mi vida
Gracias a los Doctores

seems inopportune to try to approach it with a critical eye, or to assess it in terms of quality. Again, the lack of address makes the ground for a critical position slippery [Platel].

Diary production or what I have called 'mirror-work' is work in the same sense that Freud attributed to 'dreamwork'. This is a novel way of regarding dreams, which apparently have no *product*, supposedly one of work's defining features. The product of mirror-work is problematic because it has no prescribed destination. Its position *vis-a-vis* an audience is especially ambivalent. At first blush, it seems that the work is audience-free: that it is not intended to be communicative, except to the 'Other-within', or to one's future self. Yet that account does not satisfy me, either with regard to my own work or to many other examples of journals. Though there is necessarily something autistic or convulsed about its conception and making, diarism is indeed aimed at *finding* or creating an audience, or speaking into the future. There is a displacement in the logic behind its grammar, because the Other, the 'you', is so very unfixed. Like the address of a message-in-a-bottle, it is simply 'out there' or 'beyond'. In a sense, this is the biggest stake and the source of the urgency behind the work. It begs that an audience exist for it, even if it has no confidence in the wish.

It is the self-address or provisional outward-address of diaristic work gives it a particularly 'meteoric' quality. Posthumous diaries and self-portraits often seem oracular as a function of this quality. The diary that exemplifies this for me is Anne Frank's. When I read it for the first time as a fourteen year old myself, I could hardly believe that it was not ideally addressed to a post-War audience. To this extent, it is so oracular and confronting that it reads like a fake. An interesting feature of Anne Frank's diary is the fictitious character 'Kitty' who is invented as an addressee.

As reader, we become Kitty. Kitty is in the diary's future audience¹⁷.

The provisional and unfixed address of the diary is a limitation and also a boon. It permits a freedom and flexibility that is absent in work that is premised upon a unified self, or that is executed with an intention for display. Diaristic work does not have the problem of creating a consumable product. It can collapse over and over again into meaninglessness, or in the case of self-portraits, into nothing more than autographic marks.

*

When I had difficulty in trying to account for myself in words in my diary, I used pictures or diagrams or someone else's aphorism, or, as the nasturtium episode shows, I opted for a visual description of a mental imago. When all else failed, or when the spirit took me, I switched to drawing my face: the face of myself feeling sick of myself; the face of myself experiencing the futility of trying to 'write myself out'. The drawn self-image functioned as a last resort for my diarism.

In his essay on diarism, 'Deliberation', Roland Barthes discerns four different motives for writing a journal. Of these, one in particular is pertinent to the smoke episode and my later appraisal of it, and this is to -
 ...constitute the Journal as a workshop of sentences: not of "fine phrases", but of correct ones, exact language: constantly to refine the exactitude of the speech-act (and not of the speech), according to an enthusiasm and an application, a fidelity of intention which greatly resembles passion: "Yea, my reins shall rejoice, when thy lips speak right things" (Proverbs 23, xvi). Let us call this motive: amorous (perhaps even: idolatrous - I idolise the Sentence)¹⁸.

¹⁷ *Anne Frank: The Diary of A Young Girl*, Doubleday Books, New York: 1952. Anne Frank was a Jew who went into hiding with her family to escape internment during the holocaust. Her diary logs the extraordinary circumstances through the intense introspective capacity of an adolescent girl.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, 'Deliberation', in *Barthes Selected Writings*, Introduced by Susan Sontag, Fontana, 1989, p. 481.

I dissent from Barthes' own sentiments about diary keeping: "acceptable when I write, disappointing when I re-read", because though I often cringe, I find reading my diaries provocative. His discussion of the flawed nature of journal-keeping I find arresting however, for he describes the downward spiral of signification I am so familiar with: The short-circuiting that idolisation of the Sentence precipitates. Unlike Barthes, who portrays himself as something of an uncommitted journal keeper (he is more interested in analysing the efforts of others), this slippage for me is magnetic.

Barthes' 'Deliberation' offers an ambivalent view of the diaristic project as offering both a trap and a means of liberation. He confronts Kafka, who described how, 'When I say something it immediately and definitely loses its importance. When I write it here, it also loses it but sometimes it gains another importance'.¹⁹ Barthes muses doubtfully about the second importance to which Kafka refers. He points to the difficulty proper of the Journal. 'This second importance liberated by writing, is not certain: it is not certain that the Journal recuperates the word and gives it the resistance of a new metal'.²⁰

Barthes argues that the worth of the journal is always in question, because the very literary status of its text is subject to slippage. The main torment of literature - that it is *without proofs* - is most acute within the Journal. Herein Barthes finds the value of the diaristic exercise. In this slippage, the text draws its *flexibility*, which is, he says, 'its essence'. According to Barthes, the ideal journal is,

at once a rhythm (rise and fall, elasticity) and a trap (I cannot join my image): writing, in short, which tells the truth of the trap and guarantees this truth by the most formal of operations, rhythm. On which we must doubtless conclude that I can rescue the Journal on the one condition that I labour it *to death*, to the end of an extreme exhaustion, like a virtually *impossible* Text: a

¹⁹ Kafka, quoted by Barthes, *Ibid.*, p. 494.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

labour at whose end it is indeed possible that the Journal thus kept no longer resembles a Journal at all.²¹

What Barthes describes as the 'trap' of the Journal inheres precisely in the peculiar position it has *vis-a-vis* an audience: its message-in-a-bottle address. My own opinion, and response to Barthes' ambivalent verdict, is that my experience of going 'through' the drawn image feels to me very like joining my own image, even if only momentarily. The process of reaching this fluidity approaches the 'convulsed identity' of Surrealism.²² While this process entails an erasure, indeed a 'death of the subject', it is not a violent shattering, more of a dissolution, or indeed a liquefying of the ego.

This liquidity is something that Gaston Bachelard defines as properly reflective. It is the very nature of the particular type of reverie that he regarded as having affinities with water:

Water is the truly transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux. He dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away.²³

In other words, the achievement of a particular kind of reverie would seem to necessitate this flux-like state. To be aware of a deeper subjectivity than the ego, the ego has to dissolve.

Having laboured to that point of falling away, one can experience a release and return. This is to traverse the limit conditions of language. Barthes' conclusion, that by reaching this limit the diary rescues itself, albeit in another form, parallels my experience, and offers a formula for the current work: 'a virtually impossible text that no longer resembles a Journal at all'. In the light of this formula, the next chapter offers an account of the works in terms of their execution as a form of collage.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

²² Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, October Books, MIT Press, Mass. 1993. The chapter by the title 'Convulsive Identity' is devoted to the issue of the convulsed subjectivity favoured by the Surrealists..

²³ Gaston Bachelard, *op cit.*, p 6.

Collage can be as *épreuve*: a 'proof' in the sense of a test, trial, exploration or an ordeal: as a means of transforming language proper, and visual language.

Chapter 2

On Practice

In this chapter the issues outlined thus far are re-addressed, this time in the concrete terms of their manifestation in the work process and the finished images. Appropriation is identified as a means of female fetishist collage.

Collage; Assemblage; Bricolage.

The method for making the prints was an assemblage logic: it could be construed as bricolage in Lévi-Strauss's sense of knitting together pre-existing ideas without an overarching, pre-existing theoretical framework. The distinction I would draw between collage and bricolage, is that I see collage as eschewing style, whereas in bricolage personal taste operates upon what is at hand, and gives coherence. In other words, there is more of a 'reading effect' at work in bricolage. Even if this is an eccentric view, it is at least useful for distinguishing my present work from other forms of collage practice.

Below, I offer a crude general scheme of my work process, followed by some remarks about the the bricolage approach as an etching strategy. Then I give some details about the way the style of the work developed, and make mention of particular moments in making the works. Here is the general formula for making the prints.

Step one: browsing and collecting: I create an ideas bank of diagrams, aphorisms, bits of text, illustrations of all sorts of things, X- rays, bits of fabric and patterned paper, and old magazines. I keep a drawer of scraps which reminds me of a remnant collection for patchwork. I browse and amass the things that I find, without a pre-formed idea of how I will use them, and I jot down references in notebooks. There is usually a guiding aesthetic - a 'taste' or 'distaste' to the remnants, though this is usually evades any attempt to name it. Later I

return to the remnants. When I have actually begun a piece of work I may go on a more specified, systematic search for particulars. Words may begin to attach themselves to the image. I may find some subsidiary things in the course of that search which I put aside for later consideration.

Step two: sorting and arranging. I cut and paste the fragments as rehearsals of possible connections and orderings on the plates. This step typically involves 'reading around' pieces of text that may have sparked an idea. Often I pin fragments to a wall to sort and relate them. Sometimes these arrangements turn out to be barren, or go stale on the wall, so I throw away the bits or replace them in the drawer. If they have a longer shelf-life, and by living with them for a while I develop the charge necessary to do something with them in an etching, then they go on to the next stage. Sometimes a fragment waits for a long time on the wall until the right accompaniments arrive, or it is re-utilised from one image to another.

Step three: finding or forcing associations. I sometimes modify found images by drawing into them. At this stage I commit images to plates. This step has more to do with composing a picture, and attending to its graphic qualities than looking for conceptual connections. Sometimes I am quite resolved in my mind about the effect I want to achieve in the print from having rehearsed it. I might mock-up an image and then transfer onto the plates via a screen print. At other times the process on the plates is much more organic, perhaps beginning from an ambivalent grouping of fragments, in which case the act of creating the plates forces the commitment. The plates are the plane of consistency.

Step four: orchestrating I smooth, connect, and work with the plate. Again, this may involve drawing directly on the plate, or burnishing back into it.

This summary of method is too general to be accurate. The process is perhaps more cyclical and

simultaneous than this description suggests. Typically, I work on a few prints at once. Within the formula I have described, the body prints play a part, but their creation and incorporation into the print can occur at different junctures.

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Transvaluation and Collage Practice

Max Ernst's definition of collage is 'The coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which does not suit them'²⁴. André Breton's understanding of collage's purpose is that it disturbs the principle of identity, and abolishes the concept of 'author'. For Breton too, collages 'disturb us within our memory'.²⁵ I offer these definitions as counterpoints to the *Anatomy*. While I suppose my own work could be seen as reneging on this tradition, I want to show that it is related to surrealist collage practice in much the same way as Surrealist collage relates to Dada. Hal Foster argues that Ernst's reasoning is fundamental to Surrealism -

for it implicitly characterises the surrealist image as a *transvaluation* of dadaist collage. In surrealism collage is less a transgressive montage of constructed social materials (ie., of high art and mass-cultural forms) located in the world, as it is in dada, and more a disruptive montage of conductive psychic signifiers (ie., of fantasmatic scenarios and enigmatic events) referred to the unconscious. To the social reference of dadaist collage the surrealist image adds the unconscious dimension: *the image becomes a psychic montage that is temporal as well as spatial (in its deferred action), and endogenous as well as exogenous (in its sources), subjective as well as collective (in its significations)*. In some sense the image in surrealism is patterned upon the structure of the symptom as an enigmatic signifier of psychosexual trauma. [My emphases].

²⁴ Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting*, George Wittenborn, New York: 1948, p.13.

²⁵ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, October Books, the MIT Press, Cambridge Mass.: 1993, p. 81.

My version of bricolage has similarities and differences with the Surrealist version as distinguished by Foster. As I will argue here and in the following chapters, I view my own practice as a further 'transvaluation' of collage practice. It differs from the Surrealist kind because, in the first place, I use etching as an incorporative medium, not just a physical surface to which cut-outs are affixed. All of my collected bits and pieces are transported, and fully digested into the etching. In my understanding, this incorporative strategy takes the 'psychic montage' further. I would argue that in this respect the appropriation is more complete in my work, so it constitutes more of a *theft*.

Consistent with this is the way I manipulate some aspects of what I steal to re-aestheticise them. I will not go into specifics here, but I am referring to the way I have coloured anatomical diagrams, and used hieroglyphic forms in a promiscuous way, to render them virtually unrecognisable, yet utilised their cryptic graphic quality. In contrast to Ernst's collages perhaps, frequently my use of multi-layering entails connecting more than the two realities he prescribes. I have used portions of diagrams from many epochs, alongside various texts, textures and patterns. My attitude towards the etched surface is not that it is a plane that 'does not suit', but more of a plane that *has* to suit, albeit sometimes more comfortably than others. I attempt to impose a level of control over the print surface as a plane of emergence, whilst 'floating' all manner of values upon it at once.

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Paraphrase and Pilfering: Collage as Theft.

Quotation is frequently a device for feminist recreation of meanings. Often this device has been used humorously to offer parodic, sarcastic or wry new meanings. I take my appropriations as ironic yet serious,

as means of instating myself as an historical subject within cultural discourse. Unlike many feminists, I have an avowedly ambivalent attitude to many of the ideas and forms I utilise, and the traditions they adhere to. While in some ways my appropriations may be promiscuous, fundamentally I think I dispatch them with love, perhaps the unrequited and jealous love of an interloper in culture and traditional knowledge. My appropriations then are conducted as thefts rather than as quotations or borrowings. What I covet, I mean to have and to keep.

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In an essay entitled 'Masquerading Women, Pathologized Men', Jann Matlock urges women to reclaim the longings of kleptomaniacs. It is in just that of spirit that I collect and utilise what I find:

Kleptomaniacs are the female equivalents of male fetishists, some psychiatrists argued at the end of the nineteenth century. Embracing...the 'irresistible cult of consumption', they succumbed to the desires for masquerade, spectacle and theatre which increasingly surrounded women at the turn of the century[...].

I would ask that we use our hard-won ironic distance to write a new aesthetics of the female body, its spectacles and its masquerades. Such an aesthetics must begin with a kind of fetishism - of the archival sort. We must become *collectionneuses* of our pasts, arbitrators of the details of psychiatric history, articulators of the details of the differences doctors have invested in gender. By reclaiming the longings of kleptomaniacs, we can usurp what has long floated seductively beyond women's reach. Only then can we know what is at stake in fetishized bodies. Only then can we begin to understand what is hidden in the shrouds forged around them.²⁶

There is quite a common reliance on this sort of kleptomania behind seemingly diverse women's art practices. This kleptomaniac longing to have and to keep underlies for example, works as diverse as Mary Kelly's

²⁶ Jann Matlock, 'Masquerading Women, Pathologized Men', in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, edited by Emily Apter and William Pietz, Cornell University Press, Ithaca: 1993, p. 61.

Post-Partum Document, Cindy Sherman's *History Portraits* and Orlan's performative plastic surgery. Each woman is an archivist in her own peculiar way, drawing on more or less archaic imagery and utilising it almost carelessly and unfaithfully, engaging in masquerade and spectacle involving their own bodies in the cases of Sherman and Orlan, and in the case of Mary Kelly, collecting as archival specimens - 'readymades'- the physical memorabilia of her child's babyhood.

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Bodyprint; Index; Readymade.

This section provides a more detailed and particular account of the way the *Anatomy* developed, and the relation of the body prints to the pictorial elements.

At an early stage, I went through a collecting period in which I amassed photocopies of anatomical drawings and diagrams of all descriptions, from different cultures and epochs. I immersed myself in these, in the hope of establishing for myself a new aesthetic, and a new means of imaging myself. A few particular images and ideas aroused and directed my curiosity and thinking at that time. I was particularly struck by certain images which attempted to depict something of the relation between anatomy and mind, or to depict the physical origins of the passions. Robert Fludd's *The Mystery of the Human Mind*²⁷, and similar earlier diagrams refer to different aspects of sensation and modes of thinking. The Fludd diagram sets out to depict in literal and concrete terms, notions which persist beneath contemporary thinking. The spatial relationships of various concepts depicted in the diagram

²⁷ From Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi majoris*, 1617-1621. This is quite a famous and often reproduced image. It appears in Barbara Maria Stafford's *Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine*, MIT Press, Massachusetts: 1993 p. 110.

Robert Fludd, *The Mystery of the Human Mind*

(from *Utriusque Cosmi Majoris*, Robert Fludd, 1617-1621).

[Source of illustrations: *Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine*, by Barbara Maria Stafford, MIT Press, Massachusetts: 1993 p.110.]



are very interesting. It delighted me for example, that in the connective pathway inside the head, linking *Imaginatiua* and *Cogitatiua*, roughly imagination and knowledge, is a little snaky line labelled *Vermis*, 'worm', which is associated with doubt, death and decay. The Latin *vermis* is the name given to the corpus collossum, the middle lobe of the brain connecting the two halves of the cerebellum. We are now fond of distinguishing between 'right brain thinking' and 'left brain thinking', which we associate respectively with pictorial and verbal capacities.

I surrounded myself with source materials that pleased me, but my own image production began slowly. I had limited experience in making coloured etchings, so I made some very tentative, simple little first plates to experiment with colour separations. At first I floundered in pictorialising my thoughts. I began work on some abortive large plates, never finished because of the diagrammatic style of the picture, which in some way attempted to depict the insides of my own head metaphorically, in the manner of the image I just mentioned. The awkward symbolism and the treatment of my head as an isolated fragment were ugly and clumsy, as well as being against the spirit of my proposal. The notion of the print was the relation of rationality to imaginary thought, or closely allied to that, the relation of verbally structured ideas to pictorial thinking, and the way the former has come to dominate the latter. Though I abandoned the particular print which tried to deal squarely with that issue, the notion lies beneath all of the prints in the final series.

Simultaneously, I began work on a torso image from a body print, and this proved to be the picture that formed the beginning of the work proper. That image was exciting to make, but not quite right. It was only a partial body print - thigh level to mouth. There was something peculiar about the scale of it. In truncation, my body looked surprisingly small, as though the torso belonged to

a much more diminutive person than myself. (Actually, body prints generally have that effect, but it has been more than compensated for in this series by the size of the surrounding paper). At that point I decided to use full-length body prints, and to utilise a uniform scale and format for the series, dictated by the size of a complete body print. Unwittingly I had arrived at a format which had been used in some early coloured anatomical etchings.

The making of the first body print crystallised a lot of issues. At first I had been reticent about making it, because for me the idea of a body print conjured up a primitivist aesthetic, but I reckoned on using the body print as an archaeological layer, and working up the image.

The verticality of the format was a consideration I mulled over. Some of the prints could be well presented on the floor, and certainly a couple of them can independently be read this way. Ultimately, I opted for the upright 'stance' of all of the images for the sake of consistency in this particular exhibition, where I see the works operating as one piece. The decision was made on the basis that presented upright, the pieces can be viewed collectively from afar, whereas if they were horizontal the effect would be limited to a shorter-range view.

Orchestrating my greased body and committing the print onto the etching plate turned out to be a much more significant part of the process than I had anticipated. In the first place, it is not as quick or simple as I had guessed. It was an absurd, farcical, pathetic process of covering my body with a mixture of Vaseline and oil and gingerly lowering myself onto the plate. Having decided on the desired positioning, I would ease my limbs onto the cold metal. Then I would have to raise myself again without too much disturbance to the image. Later I devised a gum-lift to slick my body with, to leave a negative mark on the plate. I did a sort of backwards roll onto a soft ground for another. All of these substances are very difficult to wash off! Sometimes many attempts were necessary to get the desired body print, and in the case of

the bitumen ground and gum, I have to wash between attempts.

The performance - for that is what it is - of conducting a body print is a strange ordeal, a calculated set of foolish manoeuvres conducted in private. Occasionally I had someone help me, to contrive the 'lie' of my body on the plate and direct me. The shared experience was rather like being an invalid. Generally I very much wanted to conceive and perform the act myself, without the presence of another, in the spirit of self portraiture.

The process has a perverse ritual quality: it is performative and ablutionary. It also entails a certain abjection of the body, for of course I am naked and smeared with goo when I make the awkward manoeuvres for marking the plate. The best, most complete prints are made by lying on the plate, rather than mounting the plates on the wall and standing against them. I always feel very implausible when I am making a body print. The pathos and indignity of the process pleased me a great deal because it was the very same implausibility I recognised from writing a diary and drawing my own image from the mirror. It was mainly this resonance that convinced me to proceed with the body prints, despite early reservations.

Beyond the performative aspects of committing the marks to the plates, there was an amazement and wonder the first time I exposed one of the plates to the acid. It was a steel plate and the acid was strong, so after a couple of minutes, a darkening bloom arose around the greased form, and it was just as though a woman's luminous body was magically emerging or submerged in deep, dark water. This troublesome mythological vision (drowned Ophelia, Lady of the Lake, Narcissus?) became something I wanted to be part of the series of images, and I began to dwell upon the contemplative and oracular qualities of water and fluids, and the relation of femininity to water, a

theme that was not to really take form for many months (See chapter three).

As a result of this 'vision' in the acid, I resolved to work with performative ways of making body prints to make images with non-passive qualities. From the early stages, it was my intention that the body print would operate as one collage/montage element - a 'readymade' in some sense, among other appropriated components, and that the valency of the body would change throughout the work: combining with, displacing, and being displaced by the other elements. The tendency throughout has been to treat the body as a 'layer' of signification, but to keep shifting the signifying role of the body/body print. The action of the acid reacts with the indexical mark on the plate, and to an extent erodes the indexical relation, especially since I bit the prints quite selectively: I watched for erosion of the fainter marks in the acid, and I reground and re-bit them to deepen some marks.

In *blood and milk* I used my body print much like a screen, and inscribed it with text and patterns which emphasised the flatness of the plate. To my mind, this is the most passive image. The woman floats, or drowns in a pattern of script and foliage. The tree and leaf forms are taken from the Lady and the Unicorn tapestries, and the words derive from a number of sources, from Lady Macbeth's speech, where she says, unsex *me now*, to some lines from the gnostic gospels, '*thunder, perfect mind*'. The elements come from a collection of 'remnants' revolving around themes of blood, rage, virginity, weeping. Even though the body is in some sense passive, it is a fundament: 'guardian of the blood'.

For *chora*, the body image was largely subsumed by overlaid material. For this image I did not commit a body print directly to the etching plate, but worked with a torso section that I had made by applying paint to myself, and using as the basis of a collage which I drew into with charcoal. I used the body shape to delimit an outline, a vessel, which was filled in the collaged lung X Rays, and

fragments of various ancient diagrams which depicted the lungs and heart as a furnace system. This image was pinned to the studio wall, with drawn and collaged elements added and subtracted to over a long period. Finally the collage was committed to etching plates via a screen print. Initially this image was conceived around the issue of laughter and transgression, but it took on broader connotations of voice and the primitive, eruptive drive-energies underpinning language. The title makes the connection with Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, which I refer to in chapter three.

Slave is a print of a twisted back, which was accomplished by binding myself tightly in ropes and string, and covering my body in a gum lift. The process of making this image was most awkward, quite painful, slimy and abjected. I printed the plates in the colours of deep bruising. The connotations to me, of the image itself and the act of making it, are of being bound and gagged. As a self-portrait, the implications extend to masochism and self-censorship. The impetus for making this image came as a direct result of having begun work on *chora*. It explores the issue of repressed and oppressed energies, and the cold sensations associated.

For *nervous system*, one layer of the form was derived from an illustration of an eighteenth century anatomical etching that I photocopied and enlarged until it corresponded to my own height. I measured the lengths my torso and limbs, and repeatedly cut up and re-photocopied the image until its proportions roughly corresponded to my own. Then I put all the pieces together (of course they fitted quite awkwardly) to make a 'body' like a cut-out doll. This was transferred one set of plates.

I took the image again as the basis for the second set of plates. I made repeated attempts to lie in conformity to the boundaries of the anatomical 'prototype', until I had a body print that fitted quite closely. At first this idea seemed like an amusing masquerade, but predictably it

became arduous, what with the repetitive measuring, splicing, and re-copying of the image. In effect, the image is hermaphroditic, and rather robotic.

Hieroglyph departs from the bodyprint formula, being constructed from layers of text alone. The symbolic forms are from Egyptian hieroglyphs, which refer to organs and parts of the body. The forms in the prints are various: uteri, lungs, hearts. The idea that the alphabet itself derives from diagrams of body parts brings into relief the connection between language and body. I have already discussed the autographic quality of text in manuscripts in the previous chapters. Another element of the textual-textural surface is that it gives a sonorous element. If you can read some of the words, you can 'hear' them in your mind's voice. Even if you can't make out whole word forms, isolated syllables can leap out, like the *Sa* syllable that is repeated in one of the prints in the series. This sonorous element underscores the 'nowness' of the work, whenever it is seen. Whenever it is read out, mentally performed, the sound transcends the graphic moment. Sound, touch and sight are embedded in the graphic moment.

[Repetition] reveal[s]...a present time that I call *intensive*; it is the time of poësic creation, or, to put it more precisely, that of the pregnancy of the visual in the textual, the eruption of the gaze in the reading of letters, the germination of a cosmic, solar eye in the grey and white flux, the snow of signs.²⁸

For *spine* I negotiated the plate from bottom-to-top, doing a sitting, back-rolling and shoulder-stand manoeuvre from the lower edge up. Like the relationship between *chora* and *slave*, *spine* has a reciprocal relationship to *hieroglyph*. The central square, with the heart shaped image, is derived from an ancient Indian symbol, which reminds me of a sperm piercing an ova, though I am unsure whether that is its meaning. Having experimented

²⁸ Louis Marin, translated by Greg Sims, 'Picasso: Image Writing in Process', *October* 65, Summer 1993, pp. 89-105.

with the body prints resulting from backward rolls, I'd discovered the 'heart' at the small of my back, so I decided to perform this ancient, very simple symbol. The result, to me, is like one musical note being struck in perpetuity.

Dynamics of fluids was the result of working with a piece of text, from Luce Irigaray (see chapter three), and moving in swimming motions on a plate. Unlike *blood and milk*, this time the text has a dynamic effect upon the body. The piece of text from Irigaray is by no means an injunction, but her assertion that fluids have yet to be theorised struck me as providing a new universe of ideas, new forms, new styles and practices of thought: new bases for language. In some sense, this piece balances against *chora* (the 'Kristevan piece'), because to my mind the issue of fluidity in language inheres in its revolutionary poetic function.

The final print in the series, which indeed was the last executed, was done by wrapping myself in plastic cling-wrap, and then oiling myself over the wrapping. Again, the performative part of the operation was interesting and quite mad: a self-mummification. I anticipated and intended that the resultant image would have the reverse connotation, because the wrap would start to come off, and indeed, strips of the stuff unfurled and left pleasing traces on the plate. This piece refers to mutation and transformation.

The body print have an indexical relation to my body, and the prints bear the traces of this sometimes-abjected performative process that I have described. As well, the prints' surfaces have in common with written manuscript pages, a narrative quality. I wanted to embellish the physical presence of the works in total, and invest them with an element I can only attempt to describe as iconic. I wanted the works to engage the viewer more actively than they could from the wall space, yet I did not want them to lose their page-like reading.

By back-lighting the works, and through their human dimensions it was my hope for there to be an

intimacy between the images and the viewer. I sought to introduced a visceral, immediate and deliberately auratic element, which, at least logically, would *join* image and viewer. Ultimately, I hoped that this would provoke a feeling of reciprocity, something like a caress, perhaps recalling the pre-Oedipal maternal gaze. Again, through this formal quality the works refer to the relationship between the body and language, specifically to that pre-linguistic space, the poetic crucible of the drives, from which language emanates. I elaborate this reasoning in chapter three.

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Chapter 3

Radical Acts of Remembering

At one level, my work is intensely personal. In the making of the images, and the confrontations I have had with myself over their making, I have grappled with the emotional issues that I contend with as a woman of 'thirty-something'. I have been concerned to account for the structures of my thinking and the 'problem' of my own feminine embodiment, especially as it affects my relation to knowledge.

At a different remove, I have been concerned with more general questions which underlie much theory and commentary about art at the moment, such as: can we speak of a postmodern body? a postmodern subjectivity? a feminine subjectivity? A pivotal theme in the suite of prints, both at a personal and at an historical level, is the notion of *the return of the repressed*. A number of theoretical issues turn on this theme.

In this chapter I will develop the themes of remembering, and the return of the repressed in a more abstract, more general theoretical level. The first section of this chapter attends to the clamorous 'return of the body' within recent social theory. The second section sketches the relationship between the female body and subjectivity in the writings of a number of female philosophers.

The 'Return' to the Body

A snowballing mass of literature posits that we are witnessing in our time a 'return' to the body: the body that has for so long been marginalised or repressed by Western metaphysics. There is a consensus in the current literature that Nietzsche is the progenitor of this tradition. This heralding of a return to the body runs counter to another voluminous trend in contemporary literature which posits the technological redundancy of bodies in this

age of cybernetics, genetic engineering and virtual reality. Both trends point to a *zeitgeist* for which the embodied subject is of keen concern.

Of the great many attempts to describe and explain the present heightened interest in embodied subjectivity, most of them refer to a crisis of subjectivity: an acute form of anxiety or some sort of *fin de siècle* apocalyptic vision. I will not offer a comprehensive survey of the literature, but I will point to some selected facets of it. The main reasons for doing so are to point out first, that much of the speculation does not focus squarely on the body as an aesthetic concern. Second, and this is closely connected, much of the literature does not recognise the *active* role of sensuousness. By this, I mean that the role of the body in its connection to the imagination is overlooked.

Surveying general literatures on the body, I found that over the past few years there have been concerted attempts to delimit a 'sociology of the body'. This in turn has raised the question of the lack of theorising of the body within mainstream sociology. In an attempt to 'reclaim' the body, certain commentators have re-examined the oppositional writings that run counter to the theme of rational action at the heart of sociology.²⁹

Foucault's notion of 'bio politics'³⁰ provided the starting point for a wealth of literature which deals with

²⁹ The most comprehensive treatment of themes to do with the body in sociology is a book of essays edited by Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner. The book does not take up the burning question of whether these oppositional writings can be incorporated within a 'sociology', or whether they are necessarily anti-sociological. I would maintain the latter.

Amongst the sociological literature, an essay by Pasi Falk, 'Corporeality and Its Fates in History' (*Acta Sociologica*, 1985, 28, 2:115-136) provides an excellent chart of the intellectual ground. He attempts to thematise the terrain, distinguishing between literatures which deal with the social-political structures which impinge on the body, and those dealing with cultural meaning structures. He formulates a distinction between the physical body and 'corporeality' as an area of transgression. He does not theorise extensively about the effects of the latter on the former.

³⁰ Elaborated in a number of Michel Foucault's books, perhaps most notably in *Madness and Civilisation*, *Discipline and Punish*, *The Birth Of The Clinic* and *A History of Sexuality* (See bibliography).

the body as the site where power is enacted by modern normalising agencies. This legacy continues to fuel attempts to theoretically situate the body in postmodernism. However, the way Foucauldian thought has been 'sociologised' has often been dubious, and his notion of 'bio politics' has been bastardised especially often. His oeuvre is so wide-sweeping that secondary literatures tend to be very selective in their approaches. The Foucauldian concept of power is often taken to be a force without agency, that runs like a current through a matrix of modern institutions and 'normalises' bodies. This view does not take in the highly transgressive, and I would say aestheticised, aspects of Foucault's writing.

The stature and curious popularity of Foucault as an intellectual was also an important force in leading many anglophones back to a reconsideration of a European philosophical tradition which privileges viscera as an intelligent, transgressive, creative force. I will take up the issue of transgression and the creative force of irrationality presently.

Two exemplars of the 'sociology of the body' literature I surveyed are Zygmunt Bauman and Bryan S. Turner. Zygmunt Bauman³¹ provides an interesting sociological attempt to account for the importance of the body in postmodernity. He writes of the body in the context of a broader discussion in which he seeks to identify postmodern modes of social organisation. Bauman's approach, with his reference to the modern panopticism of the factory and the school, is evidently indebted to the 'negative' Foucault. As distinct from the modern rational, systematic, mechanistic, goal-oriented forms of organisation described in classical sociology, Bauman argues that society does not operate, and is not theorised, according to principles of purposive ordering. Nor does it conform any more with Foucault's depiction of

³¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, London: 1992.

modern society as ordered by normative technologies and habituated bodies. The 'postmodern habitat' by contrast appears as 'a space of chaos and chronic indeterminacy', which provokes a new source and form of anxiety and alienation. He depicts the body as a paradoxical zone of constancy, self-control and adaptability in a chaotic, unpredictable, immeasurable world. Our heightened level of attentiveness to the body is, he argues, the result of economic and social forces. New adaptive, competitive forms of organisation require ongoing adaptation from individual actors, and these changes are registered in the body. Acute body awareness, then, is understood as a partly adaptive, partly neurotic response to destabilising material forces. People respond to these by exacting controls upon their own bodies in order to experience their own 'agency', or exercise their own power over themselves. 'Fitness' can be understood in a very broad sense as fitness for unpredictable, immeasurable exigencies.

This account seems to offer an explanation for so many people having a maverick approach to their own bodies; manipulating and reconstructing their appearances through diet, exercise, makeup, plastic surgery and so forth. While this account seems plausible, it could also be said that in tribal and medieval societies, the body was 'a paradoxical zone of constancy, self-control' and, indeed, 'adaptability.' Much anthropological literature exists which attests to the cross-cultural and trans-historical nature of radical body alteration³². The question remains then, as to the particular meanings associated with viscosity in our time.

³² Mary Douglas' oeuvre is a fine example of an anthropological practice that equates the social body and its strains with the practices enacted upon physical bodies, and connects material social conditions with the imaginary and symbolic importance of physical bodies. She draws on the tradition of anthropology set in place by Marcel Mauss. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. London: 1980 *Natural Symbols, Explorations in Cosmology*. Pantheon, New York: 1982.

Another sociologist, Bryan S. Turner, has published much about the body in the last few years. Turner quite seriously refers to a 'secret theory of the body in social theory'³³. The lineage to which he refers includes Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Marcuse and Foucault. These can hardly be referred to as *obscure*, let alone secret. It would be truer to say that there has been a virulent, but indeed secondary - repressed? - strain of oppositional literatures: theories for which the body has been of central interest, that have, to a greater or lesser extent, run counter to the main tenets of modernism.

In a fascinating, cryptic, tiny book, *Iconography and Perversion*, Allen Weiss makes the following pronouncement concerning what he calls the metaphysical reversal that characterises a notable aspect of postmodernism.

The history of Western metaphysics entails the obfuscation, suppression and indeed the repression, of matter, chaos, the formless, the body.' The [opposed] tradition...originates in Nietzsche's desire to recuperate the body, and materiality itself, as the origin of philosophical speculation and the basis of all metaphysics: "Soul is only a word for something about the body. The body is a great reason..." *This metaphysical reversal permits us to appreciate the profound importance of the aesthetic register*, of Gaston Bachelard's notion of a "muscular imagination." ³⁴ [My emphases]

The association he draws here, between materiality and aestheticism, seems to me to be precisely what is so sorely lacking in the so-called 'sociology of the body' literature. Within the intellectual ferment that is postmodernism, the body emerges as an important figure, the point at which issues of eroticism, value and aesthetics converge with the social and political. The assumption of the body as a field

³³ Bryan S. Turner, the essay is entitled 'Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body', in Hepworth, Featherstone and Turner, *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, Sage, London: 1991. Turner's essay provides a very readable survey of the 'anti-body' tenets of sociology; some of the body themes central to nineteenth century anthropology; and a gloss of the 'oppositional' writings within social theory. The essay concerns ideas which are mostly far from 'recent'.

³⁴ Allen S. Weiss, *Iconography and Perversion*, Art and Text Publications, 1988 p. 33.

of immanence is especially important within new feminist practice.

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The following sections draw from writings by three French women, writers whose works focus on the issue of gender and coming to language. They have in common a style of analysis of the body and its relation to speech which could be termed 'post-structuralist'. All of them, if not explicitly, then implicitly, take an anti-humanist line. This marks them apart from the kind of feminism prevalent in Anglophone countries, which for the most part has sought to forge a unified feminine identity, a goal that has long since been dismissed within the French intellectual tradition inherited by these writers. All of their writings are imbued with the idea that the principle of identity is precisely that - a principle, a symbolic construct, an *image* that is subject to slippages. While these women have been associated with the women's movement, their work primarily operates at the level of culture, rather than that of politics proper. This cultural insertion makes sense in terms of the theoretical tradition they inhabit, because representation is seen as a central issue, not as subordinate to material conditions.

The works of all of these women are often referred to under the banner '*Écriture féminine*', Feminine Writing. Perhaps this umbrella covers Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous more comprehensively than it does Julia Kristeva.

The focus of my reading was on the way the pre-Oedipal relation was described as a pre-subjective, or proto-subjective phase. There are important divergences between the various characterisations. Julia Kristeva does not disagree outright with the Freudian-Lacanian heritage which designates desire as phallic. She affirms Lacan's view that the feminine lies beyond or outside the realm of

symbolisation. However, much of her writing is devoted to analysing categories of experience and expression which lie on the cusp of - or beyond - significance. Her oeuvre concentrates on the edges of language and representation. Luce Irigaray, on the other hand, posits that feminine subjectivity has been *forced* outside the bounds of symbolisation by a masculine subjectivity that masquerades as 'neutral'. It is her claim that women are represented only by models that are masculine, and that it is a function of oppression that feminine subjectivity has been deprived of form. Her project is to bring forth a language of feminine desire.

The work of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, while having much in common, reflects the Freud-Jones debate in its differences. Kristeva enriches the Freudian-Lacanian heritage which designates desire as phallic, while Irigaray seeks to bring forth a language of feminine desire. These two women are both analysts themselves, but their writing practices, and the ways they formulate their positions, are highly literary and reasonably abstracted. By contrast, Michele Montrelay, (who has written about these issues, but whose work is not as pertinent to the images in my thesis) refers the Freud-Jones contradiction back to analytic practice. Her insight is that on a descriptive level, *both* models match up to different analytical experiences. Following her lead, I would argue that for me the fascination in reading Kristeva and Irigaray is that I can apply both their accounts of femininity to my own experience.

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In *Revolution in Poetic Language*³⁵, Kristeva develops an analysis which dovetails literary criticism

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Columbia University Press, New York: 1984.

with psychoanalysis. She explores the sources of subjectivity in speech development in the first part of the book, and examines the subversive nature of avant-garde writing, the work of Mallarmé and Lautréamont in particular. She defines a series of terms which are crucial to her delineation of the gendered subject: the *semiotic*, the *symbolic* and the *thetic*.

The semiotic stage refers to a stage in the infant's development which is characterised by a relatively disorganised, incoherent, and undifferentiated set of physical impulses and energies. The semiotic is used in conjunction with another term, the 'chora', which is a spatial concept. The infant does not recognise itself as separate or distinct. The notion of the semiotic chora refers to the child's physicality in that its senses are not yet developed: the drives are not yet structured into oral, anal and scopic drives.

The semiotic is composed of non-signifying raw materials. It is an anarchic, formless circulation of sexual impulses and energies traversing the child's body before sexuality is ordered and hierarchically subsumed under the primacy of genitality, and the body becomes a coherent entity. These energies have no fixed aim object or form. They animate the child's body in a series of rhythms, spasms movements that predate its conscious corporeal control. They predate the distinction between subject and object and thus also the child's notion of thing or entity. They defy unification, distinctive boundaries and social regulation. The semiotic ...precedes all unities, binary oppositional structures and hierarchical forms of organisation...it is anterior to the mirror stage. Although it is polymorphous it is not yet autoerotic...It is the symbiotic space shared between the mother's and child's indistinguishable bodies.³⁶

The chora not only represents a developmental stage, but it is also roughly equivalent to Freud's notion of the id. Like the id, it constitutes an ongoing layer of the subject: impervious to knowledge and language, and opposed to rationally ordered processes. On the other hand, it provides the basis for language-proper. 'Chora' literally means receptacle. The chora then, is the body in its inscribed spatial sense, which retains the physical

³⁶ Grosz, E. *op cit* p. 43.

impulses, rhythms and intonations that are not accessible to memory. One of the clearest expressions of this kind of impulse is laughter.

The transitional stage, or threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic, is the *thetic*, which refers to points of organisation which order the drives symbolically. Kristeva correlates these with two moments identified by Lacan as pivotal to identity: the mirror stage and the Oedipus complex. The mirror stage provides the child with a spatial location and sense of physical boundedness; it introduces a sense of instability and detachment. Through the mirror stage the child can distinguish between itself and the world, and - importantly - substitute representations for lived experience.

Language development, according to Kristeva, is a critical and dramatic confrontation between positioning, separating and identifying on one hand, and the motility (independence, movability) of the semiotic chora on the other. Castration, she says, puts the finishing touches on the process of separation that makes the subject signifiable. Following Lacan very closely, she asserts that the phallus is the crucial signifier in the subject's arrival at an enunciative position. The phallus 'always refers outside itself', not only to another, but also to the Other, the locus from which language emanates. The Law represented by the phallus requires the child's renunciation of the mother, and its submission to an authority greater than itself or the mother: the symbolic father.³⁷

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Drawing on Derrida's critique of binarism and employing his notion of *différance*, Luce Irigaray's project is to represent women and femininity in non-phallogocentric terms. In this light, the title of her book *This Sex Which is Not One* indicates her basic position, that in Western

³⁷ Grosz, E, *op cit* p. 114.

discourse generally, not simply in psychoanalysis, only *one* sexuality has been designated - the masculine and its *opposite*, or complement. Her position is even more dramatic. She argues that,

All Western discourse presents a certain isomorphism with the masculine sex; the privilege of unity, form of the self, of the visible, of the specularisable, of the erection (which is the becoming of form). Now this morpho-logic does not correspond to the female sex: there is not 'a' sex. The 'no sex' that has been assigned to the woman can mean that she does not have 'a' sex and that her sex is not visible nor identifiable or representable in a definite form.³⁸

This isomorphism is not seen by Irigaray as natural or solely biologically determined. She proposes a fit between language and the socially constructed male body. This isomorphism has historically excluded the feminine, but does not deny the possibility of a female sexuality. Her project then becomes deconstructive. She seeks to interrupt and interfere with the field of representation, by subverting and extending its boundaries.

Hélène Cixous' contribution to this field supplies another twist. Unlike the others, she is not specifically concerned with psychoanalytic theory, though it informs her work. Like Irigaray, her work is most often associated with *écriture féminine*. Also like Irigaray, her debt to Derrida is evident. The complexion of her work differs from the other two women, in that it has a far more speculative and experimental character - even more than Irigaray's style of writing, which is so often refractory and poetic. Cixous' 'theoretical' writing is continuous with her fiction and dramatic writing.

The following is a passage from the introduction of *The Hélène Cixous Reader* which describes Cixous' orientation to gender and to language:

[she] stresses that the inscriptions of the rhythms and articulations of the mother's body which continue to influence the adult self and provides a link to the pre-symbolic union between the self and m/other, and so affects the subject's relation to language, the other, himself and the world. Second, since a feminine subject

³⁸ Luce Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', *Ideology and Consciousness*, p. 64.

position refuses to appropriate or annihilate the other's difference in order to construct the self in a (masculine) position of mastery, Cixous suggests that a feminine writing will bring into existence alternative forms of relation, perception and expression.³⁹

The aim of enunciating a new (non-Oedipal) subjectivity through literary effort is common to each of the theoretical approaches I have sketched here. In the case of Kristeva, the attempt at characterising the semiotic chora can be evaluated in two ways. It can be seen as an adjunct to the Lacanian narrative, or as a disruptive addition to it.

For me, the fascination in reading all of these women is that I can apply each of their speculative accounts of femininity to my own experience, regardless of the incompatibilities. This is a function of the re-readings and reconstructions inherent in memory. In effect, I was reading for images that I could develop into visual 'proofs', as I have defined that term. The 'atmospheric' elements of the work owe a lot to those sources. I was interested in exploiting and experimenting with the images and metaphors that each of the French woman writers ascribed to pre-Oedipal awareness and experience, and with the mental images that I formed in response to their writing. I wanted to conjure these shapes as a means of focusing upon my own body and experiences and 'turning them out'. Also (in the sense of 'proof' as test) I wanted to try these mental images for size, to see if I could 'wear' them or 'countenance' them.

In response to Kristeva's notion of the 'chora', the main image or figure I conjured was that of the body as a vessel, or cipher of symbols. By applying the form of a cipher to her conceptual frame, initially I was simply thinking in terms of a tube or pipe, possibly a musical pipe, for at the time I was musing about presence-as-resonance, and about voice as a feature of self with its own signature. I was thinking about my own laugh as arguably

³⁹ Susan Seller, in her introduction to *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, Routledge: London, 1994, p. xxxi.

my most remarkable feature. As I dwelt on it, the ramifications of the concept of body-as-cipher multiplied exponentially. When I looked the word up in the dictionary, I was stunned by the way it covered so many of the features of the pictorial issues I was dealing with:

Cipher or **cypher**...*n.* 1. a method of secret writing using substitution or transposition of letters according to a key. 2. a secret message. 3. the key to a secret message. 4. An obsolete name for zero (sense 1). 5. any of the Arabic numerals. 6. a person or thing of no importance; nonentity. 7. a design consisting of interwoven letters; monogram. 8. *Music* a defect in an organ resulting in continuous sounding of a pipe, the key to which has not been depressed. ~*vb.* 9. to put a message into secret writing. 10. (*intr*)(of an organ pipe) to sound without having the appropriate key depressed. 11. *Rare.* to perform (a calculation) arithmetically. [C14: from Old French *cifre* zero, from Medieval Latin *cifra*, from Arabic *sifr* zero, empty].⁴⁰

By conceiving of my body in the terms of a cipher, I thought about its relationship to fluidity, to air, heat and light. These relationships are not fixed or exclusive in the prints. They form different combinatory effects.

If the form of Kristeva's argument about pre-Oedipal subjectivity privileges the image of vessel, Irigaray's imagery is very often fluid. The respective forms of their metaphoric language reflect their particular emphases on signification. Kristeva is heavier on form, and she emphasises the formation of the self in language through the Law of the Father⁴¹. Irigaray leans towards an extension of *parole*⁴² to force a multiplication of forms or signs. For her, the fluidity of the feminine is an under-developed, under theorised and under-expressed attribute.

Irigaray presents a remarkable critique of Freudian psychoanalysis by arguing that it is based on a scientific

⁴⁰ Collins Dictionary of International and Australian English.

⁴¹ The Law of the Father is Lacan's formulation for language as the path by which the child enters culture. The father is the figure who enforces and represents this way out of the family.

⁴² I am using a term from Barthes here, which refers to language in use, the speech act, rather than language as structure.

model founded on the thermodynamics of solids. She points out that in physics, the properties of liquids are under-theorised in contrast to solid thermodynamics. The unknown, mysterious properties of fluids are projected back onto the feminine.⁴³ She also approaches the fluid aspect of femininity in an essay considering Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*.⁴⁴ This essay is worked around passages of Merleau-Ponty's text, like a conversation. I will follow Irigaray's lead, and indulge in lengthy quotation, because the following passages summarise key issues in the way the thesis came to be resolved as a series:

[Merleau-Ponty]

"If we could rediscover within the exercise of seeing and speaking some of the living references that assign themselves such a destiny in a language, perhaps they would teach us how to form our new instruments, and first of all to understand our research, our interrogation themselves (p. 130)

[Luce Irigaray]

This operation is absolutely necessary in order to bring the maternal-feminine into language: at the level of theme, motif, subject, articulation, syntax, and so on. Which requires passage through the night, a light that remains in obscurity.

"The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand"(pp. 130-31).

If it were not the visible that were in question, it would be possible to believe that Merleau-Ponty is alluding to interuterine life. Moreover, he uses "images" of the sea and the strand. And he speaks of the risk of disappearance of the seer and the visible...⁴⁵

And there begins Irigaray's very involved discussion about the elision of the maternal space in the work of

⁴³ Luce Irigaray, 'The Dynamics of Fluids', in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca: 1985.

⁴⁴ Luce Irigaray, 'The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Intertwining - The Chiasm"', in Irigaray, L. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill Cornell University Press, New York: 1984, pp. 151-184.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

Merleau-Ponty. She argues that without the originary maternal connection, which is implicitly classified as 'blind' by Merleau-Ponty, the look of the 'seer' (the subject seeking to establish itself through vision, in this case implicitly designated as masculine) would not be. Thus, she argues, we cannot base ourselves in the field of the visible. However, her long discussion, which I cannot possibly do justice to here, returns us to vision. In her words, she "returns the privilege to the *seer's* look." This look is not a masterful or perspectival look. She characterises it as a *carnal* look;

...which becomes that which gives perspective to "things": shelters them, gives birth to them, wraps them in the touch of a visibility that is one with them, keeps them from ever being naked, envelops them in a conjunctive tissue of visibility, an exterior-interior horizon in which henceforth, they appear without being able to be distinguished, separated, or torn away from it.⁴⁶

Irigaray goes on to postulate a maternal foreseeing or imagining of the child. "Is there something that would make the child believe it is seen before it sees? That the invisible looks at it?"⁴⁷ This 'something' would be the child's *only* awareness; an awareness of being enveloped. She argues that this envelopment, this touching, is a sensation of knowing another: so 'difference' is the primary awareness, rather than 'oneness'.

Her argument reformulates Merleau-Ponty's. They share the wish to describe vision as something that connects the embodied subject with the world of things. For Merleau-Ponty vision is like a thread of light, whereby visibility unites us with our object world. Irigaray has some sympathy with this view of "living reference", but she finds fault with Merleau-Ponty's particular formulation, because she says it is ultimately solipsistic. It does not prove or forge a connection with the world, because the 'seer' cannot establish an otherness if what is premised is its own vision as origin.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Part of the reasoning for having a translucent aspect to the *Anatomy*, with backlighting, was that I wanted notionally to 'return vision' to the viewer; 'the seer'. I wanted the effect to be on the side of a caress, recalling a maternal intimacy; the initial envelopment or awareness of otherness that Irigaray described. I realise though, that this reciprocating gaze could have something uncanny about it; something of the gaze of a Medusa due to the possibly monstrous aspect of the prints. By monstrous, I'm referring to the way the figures are grafted onto other forms and vice versa. I think there is also a necessary awkwardness and sense of underlying difficulty within the prints, which may not read as completely benign.

Ultimately I feel that such a reading is possible, and beyond my control. However, such a Medusa reading could be reconfigured in the same way that Hélène Cixous turns the judgement back onto the 'seer' of the Medusa:

Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.⁴⁸

The next chapter looks at 'difficult subjectivity' through a discussion of the work of Louise Bourgeois.⁴⁹

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⁴⁸ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, Pantheon Books, New York: 1990, p. 254.

⁴⁹ There is a famous Robert Mapplethorpe photograph of a laughing Louise Bourgeois holding *Fillette* (1968), her large latex phallus sculpture.

Chapter 4
Subjectivity and Narrative:
the work of
Louise Bourgeois

'Self expression is sacred and fatal'

*'I am not searching for an identity. I have too much
identity'*

Louise Bourgeois⁵⁰

Once upon a time.

It was 1968.

I was five.

1968 was ordinary, as I recall. We were at The Shack. It wasn't our shack, but it was where we used to go, winter and summer. There was a blue stove with legs. It was the only place that had a blue stove. There was a buff coloured fridge, which was plump, and wore a big proud handle like a brooch on its chest. The bone handled knives were blistered already, so it didn't matter if you put them in hot water. The shack had a special smell, which emanated from the lino. It was a clean smell but tinged with what was probably insecticide. It was winter, so there weren't any mozzies but you couldn't swim, and instead of going to the beach, you would go up behind the shack where there was a bit of bush, and across the road was a dark place where a lot of very large pine trees grew. My mother referred to it as 'the old lady's house'. One day my mother and I went for a walk there to get pine cones for starting the fire. We took a sack. There was a driveway from the road that curved into the piney place. It was very shadowy. I said, 'Does she still live there?'

'No'. But after a moment Mum said, "Well she could do. She would be *very* old. Shall we go and have a look?"

'No.'

⁵⁰ Christian Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois*, Anman Verlag, Zürich, 1992, p. 6.

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'Oh, come on,'

'No.' I was losing. My reluctance seemed to have egged my mother on. She likes trespassing, my mother. I was conservative about trespassing. 'Maybe somebody else lives there now,' said I, trying, without any conviction, to dissuade her. 'They might have dogs.' I tried to sound sensible rather than afraid, so that she might listen.

'Well we'll hear them.' She was already striding up the driveway which was covered with pine needles.

The house came into view once we had walked past the curve in the drive. It was in a clearing, a weatherboard cottage, primrose yellow with a red roof and a verandah. It looked low, as though it was sinking into the ground. One of the windows was open and a curtain fluttered slightly. The movement alarmed me. I glanced at my mother and she narrowed her eyes back at me, ominously. The curtain suggested ghostly habitation, or even decrepit human habitation. Surely not. Surely there could not be an inhabitant as dilapidated as the house. It was lonely and very quite in the pines. The pine needles under foot seemed to muffle all sound, and you wouldn't have heard if someone was walking close by. My mother whispered very urgently, close to my head, 'Do you think there's anyone there?' I grimaced, opened my eyes wide and shrugged up my shoulders. She laughed and whispered, 'Let's have a look.'

I hung back shaking my head and she marched towards the house. 'Look!' She shouted, 'Here is a mangle.' She seemed to be forgetting herself. There was a thing with a handle that I knew to be a mangle. She told me that when she was a little girl, she and her brother played ships with their mother's mangle. She was always telling me that story, but I feigned interest because she liked to talk about it. 'You used to put the clothes through *there* and somebody else would turn the handle. My brother would sit on the top and shout, "Ahoy! Land Ahoy!" and I would swing the handle to and fro, like this.' I was happy

to play along with this story, just so long as we didn't have to go in the house. My mother stopped abruptly, walked over to the door and rapped on it, 'Hello, hell-oo, anybody at home? Yoo-hooh!' She was enjoying this. I was starting to feel sour. She annoyed me when she was in a flighty mood. She turned the handle and to my amazement it opened. She looked over her shoulder at me, raised her eyebrows and went 'Woooooh!' Then she poked her head in, and I heard her say in her normal voice, 'Good heavens'. She stepped into the room. I edged in behind her. We squinted until the gloom cleared a bit.

Inside the house was quite dark, but it was still easy to see that it was not empty. The air was old. There was furniture, pictures on the wall, carpet on the floor. In short, the house contained belongings. Nothing had moved for a very long time. The curtain that had swayed at the window was tattered and torn, the wallpaper was brown, and all stained with damp patches. As our eyes adjusted, it was obvious just how faded and deteriorated everything was. Yet the place did not feel repulsive or frightening in its decay.

Just very, very, still.

We stood, just inside the doorway for a minute or two, and then my mother said gently, 'Let's go now, shall we?'

We turned down the driveway, walking past a gnarled geranium in a kettle. 'That old lady must have lived there all by herself,' said my mother, 'and nobody came to collect her things when she died.' I skipped, 'Maybe she was a witch.'

Forever after, it was 'The Witch's House'.

*

Louise Bourgeois' reputation precedes her. Her work is inseparable from her life. Statements about her work and her life issue forth from her, and she has license to

say anything she likes, apparently, perhaps because she is so irascible. You have to be cantankerous to make work like that. You have to make work like that to be so publicly cantankerous.

The persona of the artist, which goes before her in the age of electronic reproduction is severe and monumental. The 'problem', if it is one, of conflating the formal qualities of Louise Bourgeois' work with the life and persona of Louise Bourgeois is not my problem alone of course. Everybody does it: we create narratives of creation and speculate on the labour that inheres in the objects.

Take Robert Storr for example: "Consider...the kind of work that Bourgeois has made and continues to making in her moments of greatest anxiety, namely the stacked assemblages she began with the prototypical *Memling dawn* (1951)."⁵¹ *Memling dawn* is one of her totemic pieces. He discusses the patient repetition involved in the artist's physical making the piece, rather than choosing to the object's repetitive structure in formal terms. Similarly, he points to the fact that 'without any concern for the historical consequences', Bourgeois will resume work on a piece that has 'gone untouched for years'.⁵²

These sort of remarks seem more than permissible when the artist herself makes no attempt at all to distance herself from her practice: on the contrary, she presents her life as subordinate to art: "I bet on art instead of betting on life"⁵³, and "The cocoon has exhausted the animal. I am the cocoon. I have no ego. I am my work."⁵⁴ So, I believe we can, we must, consider Bourgeois' work - at least partly - as diaristic. Yet it has to be experienced in

⁵¹ Robert Storr, 'Bourgeois's No-End Game', exhibition catalogue compiled by Jason Smith for the National Gallery of Victoria, 1995, p. 15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁵³ Louise Bourgeois in Meyer-Thoss p. 118.

⁵⁴ Jason Smith, 'Existence and Desperation', exhibition catalogue compiled by Jason Smith for the National Gallery of Victoria, 1995, p. 11.

the real. One has to occupy the space of the work to partake of the story.

The survey exhibition of her work was at the National Gallery of Victoria when I saw it, set out in three rooms. The organisation was chronological. Two periods were represented, the 'forties and 'fifties, and work from the past decade. In the first room were a number of her totemic-style forms, and on the wall the suite of etchings entitled *He Disappeared Into Complete Silence*. At first the totems exerted a subtle presence. They are humble, the work of a novice, though they did not lack accomplishment. Their crudity was striking. They attested to some difficulty, a difficulty of great magnitude, like gravity itself. I could not recall any of the artist's words at the time, but I had glimmers of terse sentences about control and effort. Later I found these:

*Repetition gives a physical reality to experience. To repeat, to try again, over and over again towards perfection.*⁵⁵

*If you control, it's proof you exist.*⁵⁶

*The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering. What happens to my body has to be given a formal aspect. So you might say, pain is the ransom of formalism.*⁵⁷

In the second room, another grouping of vertical figures met me. They were inviting, unlike the more sullen works in the prior set. Among them were *Spiral Woman* (1951-2). *Spiral Woman*: a twisted torso; a vertebral column; a flight of celestial stairs; a stalagmite. All the associations I applied to the piece have connotations of an upward reach; not a forceful thrust, but a gradual, assured ascendancy.

Another *Spiral Woman* (1984) twirled from the ceiling, in another room, among the more recent works.

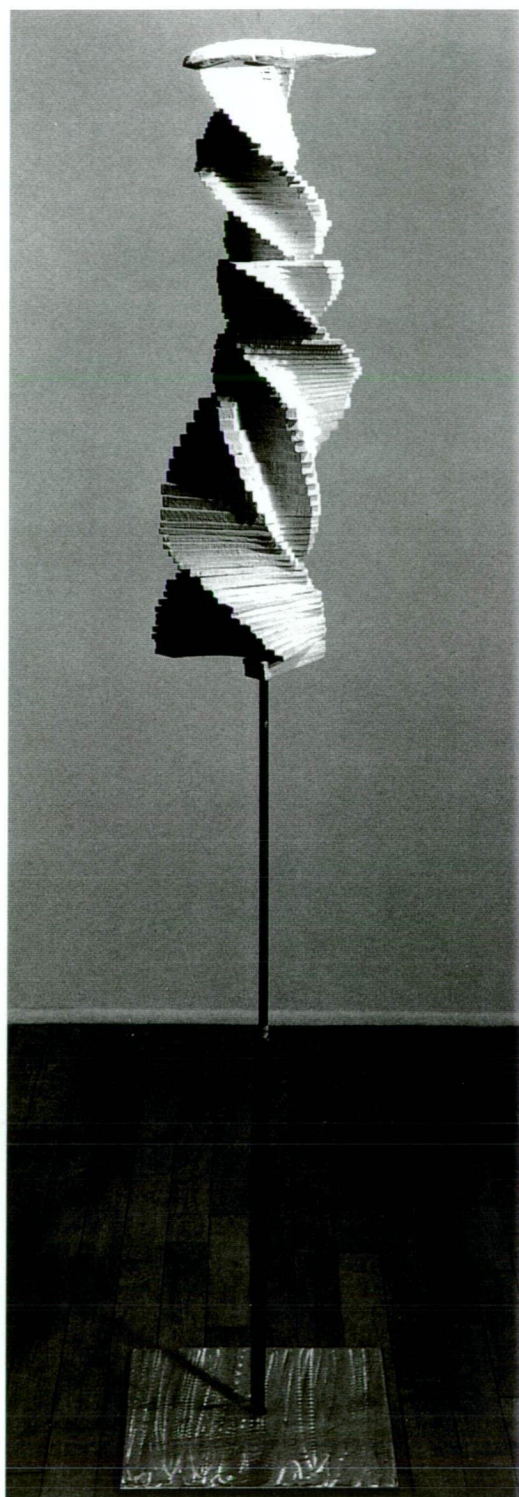
⁵⁵ Louise Bourgeois, in Meyer-Thoss p.194.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Louise Bourgeois,
Spiral Woman, (1951-52)
wood and steel, 158.7 x 30.4 x 30.4 cm

Nature Study, (1984)
Bronze, silver nitrate patina
212.0 x 63.5 x 81.2cm
[Source of illustrations: Exhibition Catalogue, Jason Smith, National
Gallery of Victoria, 1995.]





This time she is golden bronze. There was a noticeable shift from the grittier, abrasive works to the newer gleaming works. The newer forms are more curvaceous. Many of them are positively bosomy, some more explicitly so than others. In fact, taken as a whole, a striking feature of the works in this room is the monstrousness of multiple breasts.

Where breasts are absent, in the case of *Arch of Hysteria* (1993) they are conspicuously and grotesquely absent. This sculpture is sufficiently naturalistic to be called a statue, but its headless body is suspended by a wire from the stomach, and its limbs curve to form a near circle. The refinement of the limbs could denote a female body, but they could also be those of a youthful or slender male. The pubic mound is just that: a mound. There are no breasts; no nipples at all. The chest is mastectomised. Yet the figure is heroic. The spastic posture is balletic, and the shadows it casts on the floor repeat the posture in a circular fashion, accentuating the dancer's poise of the figure. I can't help but feel that ultimately this is a celebration of the hysterical condition, and an affirmation of victory through difficulty, and indeed pain. The suspended figure could have levitated.

At first sight there is nothing about the work to suggest that it is autobiographical. Whereas some of the earlier works have a roughness around their edges, this piece, like the other later works, has a great deal of finesse. It is highly crafted, yet, all over its surface it bears the scrape-marks of its maker. While the light radiates from the bronze, and the figure glows from a distance, at close quarters the surface, the skin, looks *clawed*. It bears the marks of a material struggle. It appears to have been made by a clawed being. The marks suggest a desperate struggle by its maker to bring it into existence.

Of all the works in the show, the installation, *Cell (Glass spheres and hands)*, (1992-93) perhaps offered itself most easily to an autobiographical reading. Five

Louise Bourgeois,

Arch of Hysteria, (1993).

Bronze, golden brown patina

83.8 x 101.6 x 58.4 cm

[Source of illustration: Exhibition Catalogue, Jason Smith, National Gallery of Victoria, 1995.]

Cell (Glass spheres and hands), (1990-1993)

Glass, marble, wood, metal and fabric

219.4x 2184.cm

[Source of illustration: Exhibition Catalogue, Jason Smith, National Gallery of Victoria, 1995.]





clear, green glass orbs are seated within a cubic environment. The walls are constructed from what look to be large metal-framed factory windows. The environment, the room, is like a greenhouse. Some of the panes are smashed. There is a metal mesh gate. On a small canvas covered bench, rest a pair of severed arms with entwined hands. They are carved of white marble.

There is an absence of narrative, yet the air is thick with it. I am reminded of fairy tales. None of the associations are specific enough to stick: Not quite *The Three Bears*; there are five chairs here. Not quite *Bluebeard*, or *The Princess Without Hands*. But the atmosphere has a familial configuration, and there are signs of violence. The severed forearms show that violence has taken place, but there is no blood. The glass spheres turn to *face* the hands, but they do not have faces. They sit like empty bubbles, vacuous fragile presences: dumb, rigid witnesses to a traumatic event. The hands address the orbs with a meek yet composed attitude. How long has this configuration been aligned in this way? The very aged chairs suggest that these presences, these inattendant figures, have been addressing each other, caught in these attitudes since before memory began. The chairs belong to a time long ago. They are not properly domesticated. They look like the chairs of crafts-people. Cobbler's chairs perhaps, or smith's.

As I looked at the convulsed scene, I thought about what I knew of Louise Bourgeois. The legend of her oppressive father, and the fact that her family belonged to a regional tradition of tapestry weavers, and that the women of her family restored tapestries. These things are well noted in the annals. Here is a description of the structure perhaps. I can look into it, but much like visiting an animal at the zoo, I cannot enter the enclosure. The glass is murky and semi-opaque with age-old grime and grit. To get the best view, I do not look through glass at all, but through the jagged edged gaps. I feel as though I am privy to a dark secret.

Conclusion

The works in *Anatomy* address and questions two main aesthetic traditions: self-portraiture and the female nude. These have personal importance and theoretical urgency. Both forms of representation have been the subject of intense critical scrutiny, and indeed both have been proclaimed obsolete as practices. In the thesis I have replotted the intersection of these critiques by informing it with an analysis of contemporary theories of embodied female subjectivity.

Passive images of femininity have been dominant in our culture, which is preclusive of women's expression. In order to breach the conventions which encode the female body as docile, I sought a means of self-representation which did not rely on a specular image. I made images drawing on my female embodiment, and inscribed with the patterns of my own thinking.

Drawing on writers whose psychoanalytic accounts include discussions of a pre-Oedipal primacy, I examined their metaphors to prompt my own visual descriptions of this layer of subjectivity. The use of colour, the fluidity and the translucency of my imagery are the outcomes of my engagement with those writings.

Diarism and self-portraiture are subject to a slippage of signification. This provides entry into the shattered-ego state that permits the expression of the prior, or more fundamental, pre-Oedipal layer of irrational and transgressive forces. It is within this level of expressivity that the body can operate as a field of immanence.

The way the prints are composed of collaged elements - text, anatomical images and body prints - seems to me to invite a monstrous reading. The monstrosity of the images derives from the way the forms are grafted together within the print surface; and from the awkwardness or difficulty with which this imbues the images. On the one hand, this 'monstrous feminine' is an

antidote to the passive, smooth convention of female beauty. I have tried to image a transgressive, fluid, body consciousness which overruns the boundaries of patriarchal culture. On the other hand, this monstrosity raises the quandary of the gendered nature of the pre-Oedipal consciousness or sub-consciousness. I am inclined to think that while this sub-consciousness is determined by the maternal connection, there is nothing gender specific about it as a layer of subjectivity, and in many of my images a raw androgyny is suggested.

The issue of presence and visceral experience is not ultimately gender specific, though the maternal connection is its foundation. This connection has been sentimentalised, but otherwise elided in our culture. Re-aestheticising the maternal connection and wresting it from saccharine conventions, may ensure that our bodies will continue to be the source of our feelings and consciousness, in the face of profound technological and cultural change.

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Appendix

Visual Reference to the Exhibition

List of Plates

Plates 1-3: Long view installation shots

Plate 4: *blood and milk & chora*

Plate 5: *slave & nervous system*

Plate 6: *nervous system & hieroglyph*

Plate 7: *hieroglyph & spine*

Plate 8: *dynamics of fluids & chrysalid*

Etchings with aquatint & drypoint.





